

From: Fr. Herbert Joseph Pins (former prison chaplain at Deer Lodge, 1997 to 2004)
RE: My Testimony to Representatives reviewing the abolition of the death penalty

Respectfully submitted this Wednesday, March 25th, 2009

1.) As Catholic chaplain to all the inmates at Deer Lodge, I had many confidential conversations with inmates, and unanimously the inmates say the "death penalty does not figure in preventing criminal behavior" and it does NOT provide any form of leverage in control of inmates within the prison itself. As Daniel Johnson, who was then on death row, stated: "Father, when I am enraged and out of control nothing would stop me, and I certainly NEVER thought about the death penalty." I contend that normal people with developed consciences might consider the consequences of their actions, but the vast majority of inmates have little or no conscience to stop their behaviors. They commit their crimes in a mindless bubble; the last thing on their minds in the death penalty.

2.) As for the argument that the death penalty is a 'safety factor' inside the prison. I would argue it has an inverse effect. When executions approach, the entire prison population becomes agitated, edgy and more distrustful. To violent offenders, the executions were a time of rejoicing! As several inmates told me: "I wish they would kill me and get it over with!" Daniel Johnson repeatedly told me how incarceration was a worse punishment, in his words "Father, it's a LONG TIME IN A SMALL ROOM"! Life without parole is a much worse punishment for violent offenders.

3.) While serving as a chaplain, I realized that the language of non-violence is confounding to inmates. Their whole world is one of dealing with everything in terms of violence. It is clear that inmates like and prefer the language of violence, so the death penalty is really "speaking their language"! To change society we can do so only by speaking the language of non-violence. When the State of Montana kills an inmate, we are teaching the violent members of society that killing is okay 'in some circumstances'!

4.) Trained as a theologian, I have the central belief that "the death of Christ was perfect expiation for all sins". Christ, Who was executed by a death penalty, has satisfied the pain and sorrows caused by murder; therefore it makes no sense to me that the death of an inmate will change anything!

5.) Some inmates need a whole lifetime to get their spiritual life in order. Many people who know Dewey Coleman, realize that in his first ten years on death row, he did not change significantly. But after his sentence was commuted to "life without parole" he changed and has become a powerful Christian leader of other inmates. As priest and counselor, I believe most inmates need a whole lifetime to "repent and change". I do not think we should shorten a life or interfere with God's plan, if an inmate needs much more time to take care of their spiritual work.

Thank You for considering my reflections.

Sincerely yours,
Fr. Herbert J. Pins